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# A LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE

COUNCIL OF THE HEAD GOVERNMENT  
SCHOOL OF DESIGN,

OCTOBER 6TH, 1846.

BY CHARLES JAMES RICHARDSON,

ONE OF THE EVENING MASTERS.



# A LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE

CHIEF OF THE HEAD GOVERNMENT

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

BY CHARLES JAMES FENIMORE

AND BY THE BOARD OF DESIGN



## A LETTER,

&c.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

I BEG to assure you that it is with great diffidence I presume to lay this address before you. I have been but twelve months a master in the Head Government School of Design, and fear that it may be considered presumptuous in me to urge the strong objections I have to the system of instruction as carried on in the school. But, although the last-appointed master, I am slightly the senior in point of age, and am, perhaps, much more so in professional standing,—“I am an older soldier, not a better,”—and perhaps for that cause, and for the still stronger reason that I know my colleagues are, either more or less, as much opposed as myself to some of the general principles of instruction in the school, I venture on the shortest course of con-



veying my sentiments to yourselves on the subject.

Should my views differ from your own, it will be matter of deep regret to me, but I shall at least possess the consciousness of having recorded my testimony in opposition to a system which offers instruction in the arts only in an Academic or theoretical manner to those who have neither time nor resources to avail themselves of such a boon—to those whose necessities require the union of practical results with every development of theory, and whose occupations and exigencies render the shortest and plainest road to their object the best.

The application of the arts to manufactures is of the utmost importance to young men in humble life;—to ourselves, it is the lowest branch of our professional practice. With these mingled feelings, and with a sincere desire that the course of instruction pursued in the school may tend in the right direction, I beg to lay before you the following remarks.

The pupils of the school are selected out of a class who have to live by their daily labour, as operative artisans. The ultimate object proposed is, or at any rate it should be so, to teach each pupil the artistic part of his particular business. We all agree that the first step should be to give him a good knowledge of drawing.

This should be his grammar; no man can correctly express his sentiments till he has a sound knowledge of his accidence; no one can correctly place his ideas of form on paper till he can draw correctly. But for all the purposes we profess, twelve months' instruction would be ample. Our *practical* course should then commence; our pupil should be encouraged to bring his shop patterns, the drawings he works from, no matter how dirty, provided they relate practically to his business. He should then, with the assistance the school would give, be taught to draw them again, and to mark the difference. If he has no such drawings, they should be supplied by the school: they do not require to be elaborate; a few dark lines, such as many theoretical persons would treat with contempt, are, in the early stages, of more use to the class of students with whom we have to do, than the most exquisite Italian drawings. We have silver-smiths, chasers, masons, lamp-makers, cabinet-makers, brass-founders, among the students. I need not remark upon the interest a young man would naturally feel in those matters that form his daily business; but I would ask whether his feelings of emulation would not receive an additional impulse when he found he was in the way to elevate himself in his business, to be of more use to his employer, and to receive better wages?

A young man, of but little ability, might be made something of by a course of *practical* instruction; had he ever so great abilities, he cannot make much progress without it.

Permit me, my Lords and Gentlemen, to say with the greatest respect, that the young men look for this kind of instruction, are perpetually asking for it, and are disappointed in not obtaining it, and this is the reason that we find, as the Report of 1845 and 1846 will show, the average attendance of the evening pupils is but eleven months, and that only one has remained three or four years. This latter period is the minimum time each should remain who wished at all to excel.

In most cases, except perhaps the highest branches of historical painting, the art of design depends on practical knowledge. It is, in fact, frequently the art of construction; there, as we all know, without practical knowledge no excellence can be attained. With the most brilliant intellect no architect has yet excelled without practical knowledge, and I maintain, our system, of teaching theory without practice, is as absurd as it would be to confine the architect to the study of the higher mathematics alone, or to force the landscape painter to pass his whole time in the study of the anatomy of the human figure, or the frescoes of Michael Angelo.



The feelings of the Council on the subject of design were very ably stated by the chairman at the late exhibition. The students were strongly recommended to repress all ambitious desires with regard to design. It is very excellent advice. But let me ask, my Lords and Gentlemen, whether the very simple subjects in which they are required to exercise their inventive faculties are to be called ambitious? Can patterns for carpets, lace, mugs, picture-frames, and tea-trays be treated as if they were cartoons for historical pictures, or designs for regal palaces? If it is to be a school of design, and not merely a school of copyism, I cannot conceive more fitting subjects to develop the genius of the pupils. As soon as the student has learnt the practical application of drawing to his own business, he should not only be permitted, but encouraged, to design, or draw out suitable matters connected with it. In most cases I would confine him to elementary form, to hard lines, and to simple colour. The master should then point out the various successes and failures, and show the simple principles on which the general symmetry of the design would depend,—and should place before him such approved examples as would illustrate his positions.

Permit me most respectfully to urge, my Lords and Gentlemen, that your system is not of

this kind. It is one of pure theory, and in no way differs from that which has been taught in many schools in London at least fifty years, which have always been conducted by mere drawing-masters, and where the application of art to commerce or manufactures is never even dreamed of. For my own part, I can only say, I have never been permitted, during the period I have been at the school, to give the slightest practical direction to the study of the pupils. I have always been instructed to make my tuition purely elementary, and have been always told that the young men must apply it as they best could to their several callings; and, for this strange reason, that were it not so, the young men would become drudges to their masters, who would reap a fortune through their acquirements. A most illogical deduction, it appears to me, that the designer should become a drudge, and the mere copyist should not.

In order to illustrate the system pursued, I would beg, my Lords and Gentlemen, to mention one case which occurred a few months since. One of my pupils, a young man, a master iron-monger, requested me to show him how to draw an ornamental stove front. He had been some time in the School of Design, and was a good draughtsman. I accordingly set him to work, when the Director interfered, took the young man



under his own tuition, placed before him an elevation of the Temple of Theseus, from Stuart, and directed him to copy it by a scale of modules and minutes. In a few evenings the young man left the school. By the same system my three classes of ornamental drawing, architecture, and perspective lost, in the middle of the season, from ten to fifteen of the senior pupils, who would willingly have remained, had they been allowed such a course of study as could have been practically applied to their several businesses. And thus it is the school is filled only with lads; the system drives away the artisan, and can only be of service to the young student of a class above that which the school is intended to benefit; it is not even successful here, for the numbers in the advanced classes have dwindled sadly, within the last twelve months, and the work of the masters has been in inverse ratio to that expected of them.

I will, with great deference, my Lords and Gentlemen, bring before your notice that the House of Commons' Committee on Arts and Manufactures, in 1836, which led to the formation of the Schools of Design, took the view I point out of the subject. In their Report, p.V., noticing the evidence of Professor Waagen, they state, "The inventive powers of the artist ought equally to be brought to bear on the

special manufacture which he is destined hereafter to pursue ; this principle is judiciously adopted in the *Gewerb* institution at Berlin ; in which, after one year of general instruction in art, the pupil selects a branch of manufacture which he has chosen : unless the arts and manufactures be practically combined, the unsuccessful aspirants after the higher branches of the arts will be infinitely multiplied, and the deficiency of manufacturing artists will not be supplied."

I have now, my Lords and Gentlemen, endeavoured to show the working of the system as now carried out by the School of Design, and its results as to the pupils ;—allow me most respectfully to lay before you some of the results as regards the masters. And here I would beg at once that it should be clearly understood, that I in no way reflect upon either the personal or professional conduct of the Director. He does but carry out, as it is his duty, the system imposed on him ; and when we reflect how many systems there are that present the most attractive appearances, and that seem to claim the instant acquiescence of every one, and yet, like a stately mansion on a bad foundation, exhibit, one by one, flaws, fissures, and defects, I am sure you will do me the credit of permitting me to animadvert upon what I conceive to be the palpable defects

of this system, without supposing that I have any private or personal feelings to indulge. It is of the system I complain; and I think I shall show that one of its worst features is the continual constraint, the (I could almost say) jealous supervision it compels the Director to exercise over the masters—a control, I know I may say, as distasteful to that gentleman as to ourselves; and that it is distasteful to us, that it is irksome and vexatious in the extreme, may be judged from the fact that we are degraded from the professional rank I believe we all hold, and are treated as mere drawing-masters.

We are not allowed the slightest opinion as to the mode of study required by each class of pupils, one common dry routine being allotted to all—the whole of the copies placed before the young men are selected for us—our pupils are removed from class to class, and that sometimes in the middle of a course, without our knowledge. Our hands, in fact, are completely tied, and no motive power is allowed to operate in the school which would insure the decided progress of the pupils—the principle of instruction being purely one of copyism, supposed to lead towards a theoretical system of high art, tends more in reality to create a secondary class of artists, than to supply the known deficiency of manufacturing draughtsmen. We entered the school



expecting that our exertions, after some few years, would lead to honourable distinction. We had a heavy and a national task to perform, and each gave up willingly a portion of his professional time to aid the objects required by the Government. Our pecuniary emolument is far, very far, below what the ordinary exercise of our respective professions produces. I say it without fear of contradiction, it is a love of art alone, and the feeling that as we develop it we raise ourselves in the estimation of the public, that gives us all so warm an interest in the School of Design—but under the present system, it appears that were we to remain in the school for twenty years we should toil on as mere drawing-masters; our names need never be brought before yourselves, nor could we by any possibility obtain the least reputation or notice from the public. It is this feeling that now impels me, at the risk of being supposed to be too rash in my judgment, and too intrusive in my opinion, to state thus boldly my views on the matter. And I would at once ask, can our schools ever be expected to rival those of France and Germany, when the authority of the master is so lowered in the eyes of the pupils? I would not arrogantly place myself in comparison with the great painters of the Continent, but would ask whether any artist of any

reputation there would give his aid for one instant, if subjected to such treatment?

In our Royal Academy the President's situation is merely one of honorary distinction, and the Keeper, the most active of all the officers, never thinks of exercising any sort of control over his fellow-academicians. If such duty were required of him, I am sure his high feeling as an artist would not allow him to undertake it.

The masters, my Lords and Gentlemen, only desire that their professional capabilities, such as they are, should be made the most of. The pupils only require that they may be brought forward in a direction suited to their particular business. This cannot be done if the masters are kept under the control, and under a system directed by non-professional men.

The masters, I humbly submit, should be brought into more intimate connection with your own body; we should be permitted to make our own reports, and to advise with and consult immediately with yourselves. We should have the arrangement and sole control of our own classes, and the selection of copies and examples should be left wholly with us. In short, my Lords and Gentlemen, we should be made directly responsible to yourselves, and allowed the same standing in the school that we hold out of it.

With regard to the pupils, a class of design

over which the masters should equally preside should be formed, and the students permitted to enter it after twelve months' elementary instruction. I repeat it, we are at present a mere school for copyists, and not at all a school of design.

A middle class should be formed for the higher academic branches of art, as painting, whether in oil, fresco, or tempera, study from the life, &c. ;—into this, the pupils of the class of design should enter from time to time for further improvement.

The elementary ornamental class, which will always be the largest in the school, should have a much better selection of casts and examples. The majority of subjects supplied me to place before the pupils are chiefly mere theoretical German and French prints and lithographs, with a few Roman and French casts;—of Grecian ornaments, the purest, chastest, and most beautiful of all forms, we have not five examples, although the British Museum would furnish us with a vast collection of casts of the very highest character.

Every encouragement should be offered, and every inducement held out to the pupils, to do their utmost for the annual exhibitions. Could but a generous spirit of emulation be excited among the pupils, and particularly in what I



contend the true objects of the school, the development of original genius, and its application to practical purposes, the annual exhibition, which I submit should be opened gratuitously to the public for several weeks during each vacation, would draw together the manufacturers from all parts of the kingdom to view it. The names of the pupils would be thus brought before the men likely to employ them, and those who had abilities would be certain, at least, of independence; and in many cases a higher class than the manufacturing tradesmen would be ready to patronise and reward the young designer.

When I reflect upon the poverty of the exhibition of this year—a mere collection of academic copies—and when I call your attention to the fact of the falling off of the pupils, both in numbers and in frequency of attendance, I am sure, my Lords and Gentlemen, I shall be forgiven for expressing my opinions, and, I may add, the sentiments of my colleagues, so freely.

I may also be pardoned for reminding you that we are members of the same profession, as expensively educated, and if of not such high professional standing as many gentlemen who have the honour of a seat among your own body, it must be remembered that we are their juniors. And I may also be allowed to state,

that though I do not approve of the system, I have given it a fair trial: I have faithfully discharged my duty in the school, and have taken care that there should be neither neglect nor insubordination in any way.

In the trust that the ensuing season may produce better results; that the school may once more flourish and become what it ought to be, a School of Design; and that our exhibition next year may evince the genius of the pupils, and the active exertions of the masters—

I have the honour to subscribe myself,

My Lords and Gentlemen,

Your very humble servant,

CHARLES JAMES RICHARDSON.